

Sown

Elaine lived in her mother's house, at a bend in Kit Carson Drive, where the old hospital stood abandoned in Fort Defiance. Her mother was long dead, but Elaine had touched very little. She cooked with her mother's stove, though the burners were crooked and heated the pans unevenly. She ate off of her mother's chipped dishes. She slept beneath her mother's blankets, in her mother's bed.

She lived alone, except for the small yellow bird that she called, simply, "Tweety." The cage stood in the corner of the living room, facing the East, and he loudly serenaded the sun each morning.

At first, she would put him in the cage at night and draw an old towel over the top to keep him quiet. But every night, it was harder and harder to coax him back into the cage. Finally, she fastened the door open with a twist-tie so that he could come and go as he please, and the towel lay, forgotten, in a crumpled pile on the floor.

One day, a lean, orange tabby strolled up her yard and hopped onto the ledge of her window. He watched the small yellow bird that flitted around the living room, from the edge of the sofa, to a tall, standing lamp, and then to the top of its cage. Saliva pooled at the corners of his mouth, and he began to scratch at the glass window pane.

Finally, Elaine opened the door and scowled at the cat. "What do you want?"

He hopped to the ground and rubbed against her legs and arched his long back. "Let me inside, and I will guard your house against mice."

Elaine glanced over her shoulder at the little songbird. "I don't know," she said.

The tabby circled her leg and tickled the back of her knee with his tongue. "I will warm your lap," he insisted. "I am delightful company."

Elaine giggled and jumped out of the doorway, and the tabby invited himself inside. Alarmed, Tweety retreated to his cage and started to chirp noisily. “Quiet, Tweety!” she scolded, and she smiled down at the tabby in delight. “What will we call him?”

The tabby climbed to the top of the sofa and peered between the bars of Tweety’s cage with his wide, yellow eyes, and the tip of his tail twitched in excitement. The bird side-stepped down the length of his perch, to the far side of his cage, and chattered nervously.

Elaine followed the tabby and stroked her hand down his long back. “Tiger,” she said, softly. “Let me get you a blanket.”

She walked down the short hall to her bedroom and bundled one of her mother’s heavy Pendleton blankets under her arm. When she returned, the tabby was stretched out on the sofa, his round belly bared to the sunlight streaming through the window. Elaine draped the blanket over the end of the couch, then glanced around the living room. “Where is Tweety?” she asked.

Tiger opened one eye and twitched one ear. “He flew out the window to chase the sun,” he purred.

A chill ran through Elaine’s heart, and she reached over the sofa to check the window’s latches, but the window was firmly shut. Elaine crept toward the bird cage, where bright, yellow feathers dusted the floor. She clenched her fist and bit her knuckles and whirled on the tabby with a cry. “You killed him!”

“I didn’t,” the tabby insisted, and he closed his eye and fell asleep.

Elaine paced the living room and beat her fists against her thighs, but the tabby slept through the afternoon and into the night. Finally, with tears in her eyes, she gathered each feather, one by one, and placed them in a leather, drawstring pouch.

One day, two brothers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints came to her home, and they offered to teach her how to plant her own garden. “It’s important to be self-reliant,” they said. “You could be a pillar in your community.”

“Oh, yes,” she agreed.

They taught her how to build plant beds and how to build a simple irrigation system. They taught her when to plant and what to plant. She sowed beans and squash and corn and potatoes into the earth, and what she could not eat, she sold from her own front porch.

The tabby spent long, hot days in the garden, where he dozed under the broad leaves of the squash plants and hunted mice through the tall corn.

One day, a lean coyote the color of rust ventured to the edge of her garden.

The tabby caught scent of him immediately and with a high-pitched yowl, raced into the shelter of the house. Elaine leapt off of the sofa and raced to the back door. The coyote approached, and she reached for her rake. “Get back!” she yelled. “My mother always said never to let a wolf into your home.”

“I’m not a wolf,” the coyote said, and he raised up onto his two back legs, and he became a man. His skin burned dark and red like the desert, and his hair was long and silky black. The tabby ducked between her legs and hissed, “Don’t let him inside.”

Elaine held the rake tight in her hands and warned him away. “You aren’t welcome here.”

The coyote dropped his cold, black eyes to the tabby and grinned like a snake. “I could help you with your garden. I could fix the shutters on your house, the door on its hinges. You could use a man around here.”

Elaine lowered the rake and glanced over her shoulder. “You could fix grandmother’s house,” she admitted, and she stepped aside to let him in.

The tabby turned and raced through the house to hide under the sofa, and the coyote stepped into the cool shadows of the kitchen.

Elaine rested her knuckles against her mouth and glanced around the kitchen. “What can you fix first,” she wondered aloud.

“First, I’d like to rest,” he said, and he wandered through the house to her bedroom. He drew the shades down and dropped heavily onto the bed.

Elaine ventured after him, but she hesitated at the threshold of the bedroom door. The air smelled musty and warm, and the hairs raised on the back of her neck. “I have fresh sheets for the sofa,” she offered, but he only shook his head and opened his arms.

It had been a very long time since there had been a man in her bed, and she went to him willingly. He rolled her under the blankets and made her blood boil, and at last, she lay in his arms with a sigh. “What will we call him,” she wondered aloud, but he was silent.